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ABSTRACT

At present most private colleges are pricing themselves out of the market, and are asking for public aid to survive as the independent sector of higher education. Private higher education should be seen as important to the United States for educational reasons rather than for reasons of preserving institutions. The educational reasons should be identified, for they will form the basis; for public funding policy. It ought to be supported not because of noble traditions but because properly guided it can help all forms of higher education become better. The three kinds of alleged private college privilege that are criticized as making an institution less eligible for public funds are: (1) elite advantages; (2) service to special groups; and (3) freedom from arbitrary controls. The significance of private higher education for public policy may be that a private college pursues its admittedly privileged role not only to succeed for itself but to demonstrate what could be done by other colleges. Other learning communities are the potential beneficiaries of this effort. (MSE)

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The Private College Effort: Better, Different, or What?

To anyone interested in understanding American society today's condition of private higher education presents a series of thematic possibilities. One of these dates from letters in 1813 between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams concerning natural aristocracy. A second was posed twenty years later by Tocqueville as democracy's choice between freedom and equality. A third relates to Frederick Jackson Turner's closing of the frontier. A fourth might take its cue from whichever modern philosopher one chooses for a contemporary version of the individual versus the state.

No dramatic backdrop is intended or indeed needed. Because of an impending drop of 15% in the 18-24 age group most colleges public and private face the prospect of excess capacity. Because of greatly accelerated costs, all colleges face inadequate resources. And because of increased pressures of mandatory costs of living upon discretionary items of family expense, most private colleges after three decades of predictions that it would happen are in fact pricing themselves out of their markets. Accordingly they have asked for a public policy of continuing aid in order that they may survive as the independent sector of higher education.

The curious logic of the preceding sentence has moved some people in the non-independent sector which enrolls 78% of the student population to call the private college appeal ironic not to say a little crazy perhaps.

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Breaking the custom of years at college conferences, public and private educators have dropped senatorial courtesy and are speaking their minds. As long as student enrollment demand exceeded state capacity it made sense to both sectors that students should be aided in order to fill unused private campus spaces. It made sense even that the private colleges might be subsidized in order to bear the full educational costs of more students. When excess demand ended, so did the public and private concensus. Economics has not come forth with sure proof of public savings that accrue from filling private-campus space if that action comes to mean vacancies in state colleges. And if moreover private colleges are granted other forms of state aid at a time when state college budgets are being cut back, even the formalities of public-private coordination breakdown. Such is the present climate in state capitals and in Washington. No amount of careful work by study panels such as go on at the Education Commission of the States, the Carnegie Council and the Brookings Institution can change the fact of an active at times bitter contest between private and public college interests.

The very fact of that contest however gives private higher education a chance to present itself more clearly to the public. Outside views of the private college are full of class stereotypes and dated images; the task of clarification is never easy. My thesis is that private higher education should be seen as important to the United States for educational reasons rather than for reasons of preserving institutions. It seems necessary that these educational reasons be identified for they will form the base of public funding policy.

My antithesis for the sake of discussion is that private higher education is still publicly regarded as a symbol of class privilege as reflected by high tuition, selective clientele and academic curriculum. If the perceptions are widespread as is here argued, then adequate policies of public support will await a better understanding of how the private college educates and what it contributes to society.

To its sponsors, the private college is needed because it underscores values that are important to human development in a democracy. It ought to be supported not because it has noble traditions or because like George Leigh-Mallory's Everest it is there but because properly guided it can help all forms of higher education including itself become better.

A principal objection to public support for private higher education centers is the notion that the private sector holds on to certain privileges and that to expect the public to subsidize those privileges is not right. The privileges are seen under three headings. By looking under each heading one may be able to determine what educational substance is involved. It is a truism that public policy is based on what a majority perceive to be the facts. To the extent that perceptions and reality can be brought together, the private sector's task as well as its opportunities lie before it.

The three headings of alleged private college privilege are (1) elite advantages; (2) service to special groups; (3) freedom from arbitrary controls. None of these is challenged as being unworthy in itself. All are challenged in various ways as items making an institution less eligible for tax-based funding.

Elite Advantages. One of the symbolic constraints on private college presidents as they queue up at the State Capitol is an air of having somehow been caught in the wrong line. It need not be their appearance, Harvard Co-op jackets and such; it may spring from a corridor encounter with a state senator and the inevitable greeting, "Why, Professor, what brings you down here?"

Behind such cartoonery lies a persistent image of the private college as a place of high costs, exclusive clientele and worldly removal. The image has not been helped by recently publicized charges for next year at the top-priced institutions. Tuition, board and room at the thirty member institutions of the Consortium on Financing Higher Education* in 1977-78 will average $6,272; tuition and fees alone, $4,254. This is the kind of private college figures that always make page one. Tucked well inside the newspaper, if it appears at all, may be the datum that such tuitions are 72% above the national private college average. In some professional journal might eventually appear the fact that the entire lower half of private colleges so far as price goes are now closer to public college prices than to the top quartile of institutions in the private sector. As Lanier and Anderson of the A.C.E. report, private colleges in the Liberal Arts II classification (Carnegie) expend fewer educational dollars per student than do their public counterparts. Still those colleges which shine out at the Cadillac end of the line seem to project an image over the private sector as a whole. The same image carries into views of admissions policy. Leon Botstein's recent private college critique in the Times on

* COFHE members: Amherst, Barnard, Brown, Bryn Mawr, Carleton, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Duke, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, MIT, Mt. Holyoke, Northwestern, Pomona, Princeton, Radcliffe, Smith, Stanford, Swarthmore, Trinity, U. of Chicago, U. of Pennsylvania, U. of Rochester, Vanderbilt, Washington U., Wellesley, Wesleyan, Williams, and Yale.

an anti-elite theme lost readers it might have converted when it came out under the title, "Are You Better Off at Harvard?"

Debates over elitism are easily twisted by the defensive postures people take on when their personal status is involved. To an educator in a selective college 'elite' may be a good word so long as it points to superior intellect and first class educational resources. There is a meritocratic tradition throughout the private sector. Even those venerable antagonists Jefferson and Adams could agree in their late years that whereas wealth and social rank are not proper to be exalted in a democracy, the "natural aristocrat" as marked by cultivated intelligence and ability to lead is as necessary in our society as in any other.

Traditionally the liberal arts college has made its case on the basis of educating future leaders. Until a century ago the process went on without alternatives of low-cost, wide-access state institutions. The present competition between the sectors not only for students but for college funds has brought on challenges about comparative outcomes. What does the private college do that is so special? How can it possibly cost students so much?

Recently we made an analysis of twenty-two case statements from contemporary sources in behalf of private higher education. Diversity of choice was found to be the theme common to all. Beyond this a majority of the statements stressed two distinctive strengths, namely, personalized education and pursuit of academic excellence. It was plain from most of the statements that the modal institution in mind was a selective residential liberal arts

college of under 2500 students. Such a description refers to less than ten percent of the 1500 institutions in the private sector.

People in the public sector respond that the potential for personalized education is greater when faculty-student ratios are high and when student services are well funded. Public institutions average below private colleges in both items. As for academic excellence, that well-worn term comes alive insofar as the college is able to attract superior faculty and students and to provide them with large library collections and laboratory space. Excellence in the well endowed college is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One can think of colleges that have earned top academic reputations without relatively large resource, for example Reed, but the comparative few that exist are not household words. The private sector cause would be better served if the public knew more about the less affluent examples; that however is not the way most college news is made. At any college rich or poor moreover it should be possible to show how effective undergraduate teaching can go on apart from the need of heavy department build-up. Yet discussion of the learning processes involved is not a frequent exercise within established academic centers.

As it stands the banner of private higher education as seen by most publics is carried by a few old, well-known and affluent institutions. No one should object to that except perhaps for two reasons. One, it is hard to separate out what a college does to educate a student who has entered with every conceivable background advantage. Two, it is equally hard to separate academic achievement in the public's mind from

the career-insurance and social standing that inhere to graduation from a top-prestige college. Thus despite all one finds himself proving that nothing succeeds like success as William James used the term. This is not a comfortable basis for public appeals for help to the private colleges. Perhaps one way of dimming the success image would be to heed a suggestion of Alexander Astin that the purpose of higher education is to make changes in people and that strong colleges might do more of it by taking in students who need great improvement rather than by admitting only the sure risks. As he puts it, "Admissions officers in selective institutions function more like race track handicappers; they merely try to pick winners."

It might be possible to answer the arguments of elite advantage if colleges would look into the working elements of an education that bring intellectual change. If these were to be identified as certain kinds of teacher-student and student-student transactions that are deliberately arranged by a college, we might have something to explore further. How does the private college arrange such transactions? Through what means? What elements of the college's nature and style contribute to the process? If such questions can be answered without referring to college reputation, large resources, or superior student backgrounds, the educational program itself may begin to emerge as a change agent in higher education.

The rather abstract procedure proposed is not far from approaches used by behavioral scientists since the 1930's to study college impact on students. Conventional wisdom has it that we know almost nothing

about what really happens to students. Robert Pace, whose writings have appeared throughout the history of impact research, disagrees. As he puts it, college educators haven't ever taken the opportunities before them to review the very considerable knowledge we have on the subject.

Whether or not it is possible to measure the human outcomes of college learning has long been a campus rhetorical exercise and will no doubt continue to be so.

Events in the private-public controversy lead me to predict that private colleges will be increasingly asked for specifics about their contributions. It could be a useful challenge. It offers a chance for the argument to get off the circular track of elite education -- that is, education that reinforces class advantages -- and onto a linear track of how teaching can bring about change in people. If private higher education could lead in the study of human outcomes it might put itself in position to talk about "better" education without having to take the defensive about its built-in assets.

Service to special groups. In the analysis of 22 private college statements mentioned above, the element most often stressed was the diversity of independent institutions with their variety of mission and program. Along with this was mentioned attentions that are given to students with special needs and interests. A third kind of difference listed has been classified as value orientation. Value orientation may range all the way from moral and spiritual underpinnings to a curriculum rooted in the classics to a special type of campus community, even including, as Loyd Andrew of Virginia Polytechnic Institute in a study of small colleges noted, avant garde social customs.

Nearly everyone agrees that a college's identity colors education. Individual campus character is implicit in findings of Engin Holmstrom that private college students show a higher graduation rate and less attrition along the way than do their matched counterparts in public colleges. Elaine El-Khawas, another researcher at the A.C.E., found that private college students tend more than public students to become involved in campus organization. Any of us might testify to the presence or absence of college impact in our own student years. My opening convocation initiation along with 600 fellow-freshmen into the Dartmouth Fellowship remained a slightly corny memory until years afterward when I discovered during a campus visit that urbane modern students can look equally solemn as they speak of the Princeton Experience.

To private college claims for the virtues of variety, special service and institutional character the publics' response is that once again the private sector is advertising privileges that come from serving a particular clientele, something quite different from serving pro bono publico.

The values that are absorbed from living in a college which over the years has stood for important things are quite possibly more lasting than one's memories of the words to Alma Mater. Public as well as private college alumni freely attest to this. When one moves beyond nostalgic recall into what those values were in terms of beliefs or ethics the going is harder. At that point it may become evident that the college was reflecting principles from its founding society, often a church. Here public spokesmen will say that private colleges are claiming advantages which by definition are out of bounds for public policy. They could lead in fact to suits against the state as has happened over the years in 39 states. In most of

the others the absence of court contests may be explained by the strict wording of state law against use of any public funds for sectarian purpose.

A college climate that encourages student participation in community affairs raises once more the built-in advantages of a small campus, since by simple arithmetic a larger percentage of students in a small college are able to participate in campus organizations. Participation might be increased at a large institution through creating decentralized governance units. Thus far Santa Cruz, California is one of a very few cluster-college state university developments, and its expansion plans have been halted. The general trend has been toward large university branches monolithically organized in obedience to state budget directives for an economy of scale.

At the 1977 meeting of the American Association for Higher Education E. F. Schumacher, author of Small Is Beautiful gave the keynote address, a variant of his popular series of sermons on "economics as if people mattered." Not all private colleges as has been noted are cast in the Schumacher image, and a good many that have less than 1000 students would gladly be larger even at some loss to their beauty. Most students and many professors prefer the personal gains from life in the small academic unit; "campus intimacy" however should not become a euphemism for impoverished resources or intellectual boondocks. The virtues of a personalized campus are related to the college's ability to finance a high quality small-unit organization. In this area at least, being different from the large-campus norm depends upon how much difference the college

can afford. In terms of equity, state funds should hardly be asked in order to help subsidize high staff ratios in a private college if comparable ratios are ruled out of the state college budget on grounds of inefficiency. It is a point keenly felt in the public sector.

There is ample reason for believing that private higher education has things to say about variety and value which are not confined to parochial issues or uneconomical campus size. At stake is a principle that differentness of approach to the student is the heart of the matter in liberal education. If the private college is considered parochial because it attends to special student interests, then educators are not agreed on the nature of undergraduate learning. Is the purpose knowledge or individual development? Presumably it is both.

Public policy for a state might conceive of its private colleges as forerunners of experiment in higher education, somewhat like the Oldsmobile which used to be the year-ahead member of the GM fleet. For a college to be considered for such a role brings us to the third heading of special privileges claimed by some to be the province of the private sector.

Freedom from arbitrary controls. To return to the study recently made of private higher education statements, the element which pervaded them all was "freedom through diversity of control." Several statements went on to stress that public institutions stand to gain as much as privates do from the persistence of an autonomous sector. Academic freedom, standards and innovation can be stronger in both if the private sector takes its beat from not one but many different drummers.

The matter of a college's freedom is too bound up in local specifics to be prejudged by a dichotomy of private vs. public control. Some of the classic abridgements of academic freedom have happened on private campuses both denominational and non-sectarian. Student social conduct is closely controlled on many church-related campuses and with a rise in conservative evangelical sects this is not growing less. Constraints on speakers, campus organizations and departments have been reported among colleges with obligations to wealthy donors or regional organizations.

On the public side, feelings of constraint both from the state government and the central university system are always possible; they vary widely among schools and states. Relative geographic distance from the Capitol may graduate the impact, usually concentrated upon the university branch that is luckless enough to be situated in the state capital. Public-college freedoms may wax or wane according to the prevailing student leadership and some local legislator's zeal for reaction. The most prestigious state universities have relatively little trouble with academic freedom although the climate can change in any state and any year.

Adding and subtracting the columns of freedom versus constraints leaves the balance on the private side in the minds of most, public educators included. Why shouldn't the private institutions go forward, they ask, when a major innovative program can be approved in a fortnight whereas at a state university implementing such a plan must fit the budget cycle, requiring at least one fiscal year? Even a large complex university,

if it is private, plans in terms of itself alone. State universities more and more have to tailor their plans to an entire system. With regard to institutional size which inevitably affects freedom to move, only 12% of our 1500 private institutions have over 2500 students compared with 60% of the publics.

It may be surprising that new program developments are not predominantly found in the private sector; on the contrary, evidence indicates that public colleges are doing as much innovating and perhaps a little more. Despite much talk of independent higher education as the prophet of diversity, distinctions between institutions grow less rather than more, and the top-prestige private colleges and universities seem to be leading the march toward conformity. Institutional prestige, that lodestone for large money grants of all kinds, has pulled colleges both public and private into a race after productive scientists and scholars. The results are not always outstanding for undergraduate teaching. Still service to undergraduates is at the center of the private college case. Only 6 states grant aid to private universities for graduate fellowships.

For the purpose of this discussion, what a given college does with its freedom may be less important than what that freedom makes possible for it to do. It seems pertinent to ask whether autonomy from government control is itself an asset which enters into an institution's character with the result that self-governance becomes part of the educative impact on students. In 1975-6 we made a study of student perception of the college organization as an element in his or her education. Two colleges were visited, one private, the other a residential unit of a state university system. One datum in the findings related to the issue of

outside control. In each college, students were critical of what they saw to be an administration not responsive enough to their concerns. Yet the diagnosis and prescription differed between the two colleges. In the private school the administration was thought to be arbitrary and therefore in need of a stronger student voice to be added to college governance. In the public school the administration was thought to be waiting for the state to call the signals. The remedy suggested was a strong student organization, not so much part of the governance as it would be an adversary force parallel to the faculty union. It is harder for the president of a unit in a large state system to build institutional self-esteem. Both faculty and students tend to downgrade the president's office as a way-station in some statewide Weberian bureaucracy.

If findings are correct that institutional identity and integrity have positive effects upon the quality of education, then two closing thoughts are proposed for the private college and public policy. One thought is optimistic, the other perhaps less so.

First as they say, the bad news. Public-sector criticism of state and federal aid for the private sector has played upon the contradictions involved when a college which has dedicated its program to freedom seeks a funding source which above all others promises outside control. From its early studies to the current reports by the Council on Policy Studies, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education has debated the question. Periodically it has come out with suggestions that the practicable solution may be quantitative: that is, that a private college's independence may be preserved if a state grants it no more than a predetermined percentage of the aid per student it appropriates to a counterpart public institution. What

laws of behavior fix that percentage? It would seem that no law is as strong as accelerating need. In 1973 the Commission's recommended percentage was "not greater than about one-fifth." In 1975 the Carnegie Council increased the figure to one-half; in 1976 in another report it stated, "We believe a 'peril point' is reached when an average of one-half as much state subsidy on a per student basis is given...to a private as to a comparable public college."

During the past year an unprecedented number of studies have been launched by agencies in response to growing concerns over government intervention in higher education. A national commission funded by a major foundation is about to get underway. The facts impel belief that the peril point, whether it be 20% or 37-7/8%, may have been reached already and that safety is not a matter of percentages so much as it is of explicit agreements concerning process. According to Oxbridge tradition the colleges of the University retain three basic rights which sustain the autonomous spirit: to admit their own students; to appoint their own faculty; and to decide their own courses of study. The Claremont Colleges since 1925 have resisted centripetal forces toward one homogenized institution through concrete agreements that are continually reviewed and reinforced.

Perhaps it is unreal to propose that independence in higher education can be preserved through studying the elements of process involved as did the fathers of the Constitution. As with democracy itself one never knows whether or not public aid can be reconciled with institutional autonomy until it has been deliberately tried.

The good news may lie in the same possibility that the way a college is organized affects the quality of its education. I submit that this could

be close to heart of the private college story. Evidence is scant that it has been systematically studied; 1500 college studies as reported a few years ago by Feldman and Newcomb in The Impact of College on Students have strangely missed a frontal approach to the impact of the college organization itself on student values. With advances in studies of organization theory as well as practice the time is right to inquire into matters such as these:

-- Who proposes a college's educational purposes, how are they decided and what is the extent of student, faculty and staff participation.

-- What connections exist between the college's purposes for human development and its staff or student personnel policies.

-- What relationships exist between institutional autonomy and the participation of its campus constituencies in governance.

-- How does a college evaluate its own production, who participates and how are the findings made known to its publics.

This discussion has followed in some fashion the order in its title, "Better, Different or What?" In offering up the private college or university as a laboratory for the joint exercise of responsible freedom we finish with an or-What. The significance for public policy may be that a private college pursues its privileged role -- and the evidence remains that it is privileged -- not only to succeed for itself but to demonstrate what could be done by other colleges. Thus one vital contribution of a private college to its state and region can be to explore the relations between the free self and society in a college learning situation anywhere. Among the potential beneficiaries of the effort will be other learning

communities whether private or public, higher or secondary, institutional or informal. It is conceivable that the private institution with its greater freedom and mobility might illustrate the benefits of freedom and mobility in a way that could be exported. A large public university system, for example, might catch the fever and begin decentralized controls among its campuses around the state.

The private sector has ahead a steep uphill climb if it is to rationalize its case for continuing inclusion in public support policy. The case should improve to the extent that a college becomes able to present itself as a conscious instrument of student development by undergraduate education. To accomplish such a feat, I believe, will call upon it to learn more about its inner workings for educating people than it, or any of us in the college business, now finds it knows.

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